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# CLEMENCEAU

BY GRAHAM H. STUART

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To the ordinary American fairly conversant with the political history of his country, its national politics and policies are inseparably intertwined with the personalities of its Presidents. Under the Third Republic of France, if Thiers be eliminated, President before the present constitution was promulgated, no French President could be named whose personality has had any lasting influence upon the country's destiny. Casimir-Perier tried, but soon gave up in disgust—even Poincaré, who as Prime Minister was a vital force in the Republic, has been reduced to the same impotence which has characterized the Presidents who have preceded him. The names which stand forth as truly significant of contemporaneous France, Gambetta, Jules Ferry, Waldeck-Rousseau, Clemenceau, all have directed her destiny from the tribune as Presidents of the Council. But even Prime Ministers in France have powers of a most ephemeral sort, and an English critic has asserted that it would be rash to say that the Third Republic had produced a politician worthy of the name of statesman. Has the long political record of the present incumbent of the Premiership of France been of such a sort that he deserves the name, or have the people of France in dire need of a statesman given him a last golden opportunity to merit it?

In order to understand the underlying causes of the fifty changes of ministry which have occurred between the Franco-Prussian War and the outbreak of the World War, many of which were engineered by Clemenceau, a brief consideration of the system of government under the present constitution of France, and how such a constitution was acquired, is essential.

In 1814, after a kaleidoscopic series of changing governments—Bourbon absolutism, red republicanism quickly developing into terrorism, and only checked by Napoleonic imperialism—France decided to adopt a constitutional monarchy. Inasmuch as Montesquieu had long since written his *Esprit des Lois*, in which he so highly extolled what he considered to be the English parliamentary system, she looked no further than across the Channel. The success of the Constitutional Charter was not all that could be desired; Charles X was forced out, the constitution was revised, and under Louis Philippe we have the most successful working of parliamentary government in France, if a government may be called a success which can be overturned with the ease with which Louis Napoleon succeeded in causing the downfall of the July monarchy. A new constitution, where the separation of powers was still more accentuated, was adopted, but the Napoleonic tradition was not conducive to republicanism and it was not till almost the end of the empire that a parliamentary system was re-established. The *débâcle* of 1870 engulfed not only the empire, but also the constitutional régime, and the National Assembly under the able direction of Thiers was more interested in getting rid of the Prussian invader than in governing according to a republican formula. With the Commune put down and France redeemed, the jealousies of the various monarchical factions allowed the Republicans to triumph, and the Assembly was reluctantly forced to draft the constitution, which with few changes is the system of government under which France exists today.

Clemenceau has said in the Chamber with his accustomed bluntness that the French Republic is governed incoherently. A careful scrutiny of the parliamentary system as exhibited under the Constitution of 1875 will clearly bear out the criticism. The fundamental weakness is the lack of a responsible head—the President, who is given powers commensurate with those of the President of the United States, has them completely nullified by the necessity of having all his acts countersigned by a minister, and the ministry, instead of being omnipotent as in the English system, is not merely responsible to its own majority party in Parliament, but to any individual of any political group. Its downfall may be caused by an interpellation upon the most trivial question. The fact that there are no two great parties, but

merely a series of groups, several of which must unite to form any ministry at all, and the ever existent French national characteristic of changeability so well summed up in their proverb, "*Otes-toi de là que je m'y mette*," clearly shows how a powerful personality like Clemenceau may become the terror of weak ministries and obtain the well deserved epithet of *tombéur de ministères*.

When on November 13th last the Painlevé Cabinet resigned after a debate on the Allied War Council, when its vacillating internal policy regarding Caillaux and Malvy was especially criticized, President Poincaré called upon Georges Clemenceau to form a Cabinet. In less than twenty-four hours the veteran parliamentarian had formed a Cabinet which, following his formal address of ministerial policy, received a vote of confidence by 418 to 65, 63 of those opposing being Socialists. That a Radical who has as many bitter enemies as Clemenceau should be able to receive such an overwhelming vote of approval gives promise that finally the French Chamber has decided to follow a more vigorous policy, and has picked the man who, though he has been accused of many failings, has never been accused by his most violent enemies of a lack of vigor or of patriotism.

Georges Clemenceau, now seventy-six years of age, was born in La Vendée, and his character has always shown something of the harshness of his early environment in Brittany. His father, a stern Republican, who was long imprisoned for his opposition to Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état* of 1851, brought his son up in the Republican creed, and the son, who had the greatest respect for his father, never abandoned the principles so early inculcated. His mother was a very well educated woman, and herself prepared her son for the High School at Nantes, where Georges was an excellent orator, but a rather unpromising student. The one exception was his quick mastery of the English language, and at a later day he confessed that this was principally due to his desire to read *Robinson Crusoe*.

As his father was a doctor, Georges came to Paris to study medicine, and in the *Quartier latin* he became an ardent enthusiast in the movement termed *le réveil de la jeunesse*. Through his knowledge of English he became acquainted with a wild soldier of fortune named Cluseret, who had served in the United States Army against the South, and who with several Yankee friends vehemently

opposed Napoleon's open encouragement of the Confederacy. It was due to this chance acquaintanceship that the young medical student became acquainted with American history and felt a desire to see the country—a desire which he was to gratify sooner than he expected.

Disgusted with political conditions at home, in 1865 he came to America with letters to Horace Greeley, and while waiting for patients he wrote a little, and later taught French literature in Stamford College. One of his friends once declared that all but one of the ladies who came to his courses were engaged, and she became Mme. Clemenceau. At any rate he married Miss Mary Plummer, and when he returned to France in 1869 he took with him his American wife and child. He settled in Montmartre, which even then was an unruly quarter, though it had not yet acquired its present reputation as an abode of *cocottes* and *apaches*. During the Revolution of 1870 he was elected *maire* of his *arrondissement*, and the following year he was sent as a radical delegate to the National Assembly, where he became a friend of Gambetta and aided him in opposition to Bismarck's terms of peace. When the Assembly removed to Versailles, and refused to hold any parley with the Commune, Clemenceau, although not wholly in sympathy with the Commune, resigned.

The Parisian Government soon afterwards expelled him from Montmartre, but he immediately helped to found the *League des Droits de Paris*, and when the national Government regained the upper hand, he did all in his power to save the Communists. He regained his prestige at Montmartre when the terrible passions of the Commune had cooled, and he was sent to the Paris Municipal Council as its delegate, and remained there for five years, finally becoming its president. He resigned only to take his place as a member of the Chamber, where his first speech was a powerful plea for complete amnesty for the Communists, and the eloquence and fearlessness of this first speech gave him a position among the leading Radicals. He did not cease his agitation until, after a five years' struggle, he gained his point, and a complete amnesty was declared. It was at this time that he first came into opposition with M. Ribot, whom he was to oppose so often in the future.

Clemenceau was one of the few friends of Gambetta, who aided in resisting Marshal MacMahon in his attempt to dis-

solve the Chamber of October, 1877, and at MacMahon's downfall Clemenceau wished to see Gambetta president; but already it was realized that under the recently made constitution a lay figure was needed for the presidency, rather than a powerful personality like Gambetta, and the cautious and parsimonious Grévy was chosen. Gambetta, keenly aware of the hostility of Grévy, knew that although he was leader of the majority group of the Republicans he would never be asked to form a ministry by Grévy except through pressure. He thereupon changed his tactics, and his party, the Republican Union, by its tacking and hedging and throwing overboard many of the fundamental precepts of the Revolution, and following a policy of opportunism, completely alienated the Radicals. This group now turned to Clemenceau as their leader.

It was at this period that Clemenceau started in upon his campaign of unseating ministries who failed to keep their promises, a procedure which was to make him the most feared and most hated man in French public life. There is no doubt that he used his power insolently; his cutting, clever speeches, logical but merciless, sought out the vulnerable spots of his opponents and rent asunder all screens of hypocrisy as though they were cobwebs. The Fourtoubrogie ministry, de Freycinet two or three times, Jules Ferry, and even the redoubtable Boulanger himself fell under his onslaughts. Nor was his oratory bombastic or violent. In speaking, Clemenceau usually stood with his hands in his pockets, talked slowly and deliberately, in a clear but wholly unimpassioned voice. Camille Pelletan, one of his most faithful adherents, thus described him on the rostrum: "His movements betray a nervous brusqueness but mastered by an iron will, by a *sangfroid* always alert. His clear, quick, incisive tone compels attention. There is no ornament except from time to time a biting phrase, or a word striking in its bitter sarcasm. No desire to embellish his words or to round out his periods. It is logic blunt and unanswerable."

Another attribute which contrived to keep him before the country was his power to strike the public imagination. No matter what he did, it seemed to be done in a picturesque fashion, and although his personality oftentimes failed to attract, it never failed to attract attention. In many ways he might be compared to Roosevelt—an English contem-

porary has aptly styled him "Neither consistent nor politic, but always picturesque." Could Roosevelt sum up his own policy better than Clemenceau has done it for him: "*Vous serez toujours fort si vous gouvernez avec le pays.*" He too is a coiner of phrases—his term "*bloc*" to designate the theories of the Revolution, which he insists must be perpetuated, has served as an apt designation for his party in the Chamber. It was he who provided Zola with the striking title *J'accuse*, for his famous letter which was to pave the way for the ultimate acquittal of Dreyfus. His phrase, "I am voting for Loubet," became a political battle cry and Loubet became President. Strongly opposed to a colonial policy which now has been proved to have been the one redeeming feature of the opportunist régime, he drove Jules Ferry from power with a nick-name, *le Tonkinois*. His picturesqueness of diction may be shown by this sentence from one of his political speeches to his constituents in the Var: "A minister is nothing at all, a stick floating on water. You can never thank us too much that we do not do more harm than we do."

Clemenceau has not merely fought with his pen—he has always been ready to defend his pen with sword or pistol, and on many an occasion he has been given opportunity to do so. It is doubtful whether he himself could say just how many duels he has fought. Gambetta termed him with his two fellow radicals, Lockroy and Perin, "The Three Musketeers." His duels with Paul Deschanel and his most bitter enemy, Paul Déroulède, are perhaps the most famous, though his duel with the Prince de Chimay over a newspaper article intimating that the Prince had retained his American wife's fortune when she ran away with the gypsy Rigo, gained him the greatest notoriety.

No human being could make as many enemies as Clemenceau and hope to go wholly unscathed, and when his fall came it was overwhelming. The Panama Canal scandal, which was almost as disastrous to the French bourgeoisie as the Revolution was to her aristocracy, was the indirect cause. Since 1878 Clemenceau had been director of a newspaper *La Justice*, in which he could freely advocate his policies of free education and the separation of church and state. A certain Jewish banker, Cornelius Herz, who at one time had possessed some shares in *La Justice*, and who was now suspected of having acquired his wealth through his dealings

with de Lesseps, was accused of being assisted in his various shady transactions by Clemenceau. To accuse Clemenceau of being wealthy was so ridiculous that he had only to give proofs of his almost impoverished condition to refute it. But his enemies were determined to get revenge, and they next accused him of being unfriendly to the Russian Alliance which all France was madly enthusiastic over. They even forged letters in order to convict him of selling out his country to England. Déroulède made a wild denunciation of Clemenceau in the Chamber, accusing him to his face of being a traitor to his country, asserting that his colleagues shared his views, but were only kept from expressing them by the fear of the caustic tongue and dueling ability of Clemenceau. The great Radical leader listened quietly to the denunciation and answered it in one short sentence, "M. Déroulède, you lie." The duel which followed settled nothing. The press took up the affair and all the so-called proofs were shown to be forgeries, but the tide of Clemenceau's popularity had turned and he was ruined politically.

The greatness of the fall of one who had so long possessed almost autocratic power might have been expected to cause a complete withdrawal from the public eye, for a time at least. To Clemenceau it simply meant that, Phoenix-like, an author was to arise from the dead ashes of a politician. He contributed numerous articles to the daily press; tried fiction and the drama. A play produced at the *Renaissance* was fairly successful and his novel *Les Plus Forts*, a keen satirization of modern social conditions, though crude in places, was powerful. As a philosopher he was even more successful, and the brilliant series of essays entitled *Le Grand Pam*, gave him the reputation of being a profound and logical thinker. However, his favorite medium of expression was the press, and a newspaper, *L'Aurore*, which he established and directed during this period, was the real factor in his political rehabilitation. The Dreyfus affair gave him his great opportunity. He was one of the first to be convinced of the innocence of the Jewish officer and he immediately opened the columns of his paper to Zola and other defenders. He, himself, wrote a series of polemics in defence of the unfortunate Dreyfus, which by their sustained power of attack and keen incisive logic, caused the justly fearful defenders of Henry and Esterhazy to curse silently the unbridled freedom of the



press. Before Dreyfus had finally seen the last blot on his honor erased, Clemenceau had been returned to the political arena as a Senator, by the same district which had cast him out so indignantly as a Deputy some years before.

It might seem as though fate had chosen his reappearance at a time when his invective and merciless satire would have boundless opportunities. The Waldeck-Rousseau ministry had just come to an end, the longest and one of the ablest ministries of the Third Republic, and what is still more remarkable, one which came to an end by the voluntary retirement of the premier. The new ministry under Emile Combes, a radical whose anti-clerical propensities were of an ultra violet hue, was to bring France to its lowest point of political degeneration. The sinister influence of the Socialist, Jaurès, was felt in every decree of the Chamber. The Act of Separation of 1906, which had severed the relations between the Church and State, was carried out with brutal severity towards the religious orders. As the pursuit of internationalism quickened, the need of military preparedness seemed to vanish, and the term of military service, already down to three years, was reduced one more. Huge posters on walls and buildings called to the people to join with their German brothers and crush out the military despotism of the army. The Minister of War was more interested in reports of the petty jealousies of the army brought to him by his Freemason spies, than in maintaining an effective military force. Patriotism was a myth. Never did Clemenceau have a more fitting subject than Combes, and never did he use his caustic pen to better effect. The reaction came and once more a ministry had fallen at the hands of the Tiger.

The Rouvier ministry tried valiantly to cope with the storm which the one patriotic member of the former cabinet had aroused by his strengthening French influence in Morocco. This was interfering with German plans, and although Delcassé had been held over as the most able man whom France possessed for the direction of Foreign Affairs, he was now sacrificed, and Algéciras showed France internationalism from the German point of view. The weak Sarrien ministry which followed had several strong men in it, but the man who was to have the real power was the Minister of Interior, Georges Clemenceau. Before the year was over President Fallières had asked him to become the nominal as well as the actual head of the cabinet.

Now that the great destroyer of cabinets had at last become President of the Council, what sort of policy might he be expected to pursue? His enemies had always claimed that he had no policy other than the destruction of others—"this parliamentary musketeer, this *d'Artagnan* of the extreme left, without principles or prejudices," as the well known French critic, Ernest-Charles, writes—what sort of policy could such a man pursue? His great catch-phrase "the Revolution is a *bloc*," although used with great success as a party slogan meant nothing after all. He had always been against the Empire, but the imperial ghost no longer stalked. His hostility to the church can be best expressed by his own suggestion to the priests: "Gentlemen, the other world is a very fine place, go and rule in it." He had declared that ministers did not wish to act; they wished to live. Could constructive statesmanship be expected from such a man?

His fearlessness and disregard for criticism were immediately shown by choosing as Minister of War, General Picquart, who as a colonel, had sacrificed his future military career in befriending Dreyfus. At an early Parliamentary session, instead of side-stepping the redoubtable Jaurès, he met him on his own ground, and the result was one of the greatest debates that the Chamber had ever listened to. All Paris was delighted—his ministry was established. The treatment which he accorded the Church will always do him honor, for notwithstanding his cynical regard for both the Pope and the Concordat, he realized that French Catholics were French people and treated them accordingly. His policy in regard to strikes and labor agitation was not so well considered—in fact in its quick changes from iron handed suppression to the most indifferent *laissez aller* it was no policy at all. In his absolute control of the prefectures throughout the country, an excellent political machine of French model, and in his utter disregard for the Chamber which he lorded over, he hardly carried out the ideals of popular government which he had so often expressed. An Englishman has thus picturesquely characterized him: "M. Clemenceau in power dropped principles, battle cries and dogmas, though chosen because of them. He kept the country down to facts and Parliament kept him in office accordingly."

Fortunately the final judgment of a ministry's performance is not confined wholly to internal affairs, even though

the prime minister retains the Portfolio of Interior. Clemenceau had picked as his Minister of Foreign Affairs the same man who holds the office today, his friend Stephen Pichon, a man who had already served his country in many capacities, as deputy from Paris, as minister in Santo Domingo, as resident-general of Tunis, as ambassador to China during the Boxer Rebellion, and whose fearlessness and ability were now to have their greatest test. *Marianne* could smile once more when the Kaiser snarlingly recoiled *pour mieux sauter*, after Algeciras had shown that international highwaymen do not always get away with the spoils; but the thought of Tangier would always bring the blush of shame to her cheek until she alone, with the world looking on instead of helping, could answer the Teutonic savage in a way that even he might appreciate. Casablanca gave her the chance. The Prussian war-lord once more demanded that France cringe before him. The Schnaebelé Affair, Fashoda, Tangier—must France always cower—would the man who had faced death a score of times without fear tremble when he held his country's destiny instead of a revolver in his hands? Clemenceau was true to his creed. He refused the demand, not in the devious fashion of diplomacy, but flatly and without excuse. The Kaiser's bluff was called. The next time he would wait until he wished to strike before speaking. France will never say that the Ministry of Clemenceau was a failure. Victor Berard, writing in the conservative *Revue de Paris* a few months afterwards, well expressed the feeling of France: "Too high praise can never be given to the Clemenceau-Pichon Ministry for the service which they rendered at that time, not only to our own national interests, but to the cause of European peace. M. Clemenceau by his firmness in November, 1908, has been, I believe, the best workman of the present accord."

It was one of the weird paradoxes of politics that his second fall was to a great extent due to the very incident the painful memories of which his strong policy had almost obliterated. Delcassé had attacked the ministry's naval policy on many occasions—he had even brought about the downfall of the Minister of Marine, following the explosion on the *Jena*—but for once Clemenceau's bitterness carried him too far. In attacking his rival he evoked the incident of Tangier, which all France wished to forget. Even his own valiant efforts to give her the right to forget could not

save him, and his cabinet met the fate that he had so often prepared for others.

Almost a decade has passed and although "the Tiger" has grown old he has ever kept his claws sharpened for the enemies of France. She had but to call. Once more fighting her greatest fight for freedom, France must struggle not only against the foreign foe, but against the more insidious attacks which are being made at her very heart, and by those whom she has given the honor to be her protectors. Caillaux, a minister in Clemenceau's former cabinet, and afterwards Prime Minister himself; Malvy, Minister of Interior under Caillaux and carried over by Viviani; Humber, senator and proprietor of *Le Journal*; Turmel, member of the Chamber; Leymarie, head of the Secret Service: what a roll of dishonor! Never was there a more crying need for a stern, ruthless leader who will crush out treachery wherever it raises its head. All France aroused has called him.

Who could resist this appeal of the brave women of d'Oberville-en-Caux: "We women of France, mothers, wives, sisters of the brave soldiers of Normandy, profoundly indignant at the scandals of treason, the horror of which has penetrated into the depths of our country, we arise to cry vengeance against the traitors who strike our brave loved ones in the back while offering their blood so valiantly to our dear native land. To you *M. le Président du Conseil*, to you, tireless fighter, champion of justice, Frenchman and patriot we appeal—we rally under your flag, the emblem of energy—we have faith in your standard."

This desire for Clemenceau made itself felt in the Chamber when the vote of confidence was taken, and if his speech may be considered an outline of his policy, France will not look to him in vain. A cold, dispassionate speech perhaps, but the hidden fire of patriotic purpose beneath it—the patriotism of a man who knows no fear, whose heart beats but for France, who believes in her destiny and will battle to the last ounce of his strength to keep her in the place where her valiant sons have gladly given their blood to place her—*la France éternelle*.

GRAHAM H. STUART.